



## Pick Your Path to Health

### His, Hers, and Ours: The New Extended Family

Kareemah Mills has three stepmothers, and she is one of seven children. Three of her siblings are her half-brothers and half-sisters.

The makeup of Mills' family is all too common these days. It is a prime example of "the new extended family," which is partly an outgrowth of exploding divorce rates in recent decades, delayed marriages, and the rise in the number of African American women who are heading households as single mothers. In fact, single mothers now head nearly one-half of all African American households. These single moms or *their* mothers have assumed the primary responsibility for making these new extended families work.

Traditionally, an extended family might have consisted of a mother, a father, a couple of children and occasionally a grandparent living under one roof. Outside of the home, these family ties included aunts, uncles, and cousins as well.

"A grandparent maintains the household in three-fourths of families that have both grandparents and grandchildren," said Ken Bryson, co-author with Lynne M. Casper of *Coresident Grandparents and Grandchildren*. In the remaining one-fourth of families, parents maintain the home and raise the children. But as divorced women and men with children remarried, the extended family group began to consist not only of grandparents, but also greater numbers of half-sisters and half-brothers.

This new type of extended family can present challenges for some family members who may find it hard to accept the changes. Women can take the lead on "co-parenting" and help to ensure that all adults involved in the family unit are working together—or at least peacefully.

"The biggest problem in many cases is the kids having a lack of consistency," says Dr. Ivor Horn, a pediatrician at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, DC. "The most important thing is that the parents work through their issues and not use those issues against the child or put the child in between [them]."

That's the approach in Mills' family. "We act as a family and love each other as one, even though we all have different mothers," explains Mills,

24. "We were never allowed to call each other a half-sister or a half-brother."

Dr. Horn also notes that "it's necessary to have consistent rules between the two homes. It's important that the children know that their parents' love is not contingent upon the time spent in each home. In other words, children should know that consistent parenting and love is always there, regardless of which parent they are spending time with.

With her books entitled *Why Don't We Live Together Anymore and I Have A New Family Now* (Concordia Publishing House), author Robin Prince Monroe helps parents form happier extended families. Monroe explains how parents can help children understand why they should not fear changes in their family—and how they will always be a part of God's family.

Here are some steps recommended by experts that mothers and grandmothers can take to help smooth the blending of families:

- Start new traditions for the new family so that no one feels left out of family events.
- Make sure that the children have time to adjust to their new family. Don't expect them to jump right in and accept all of these changes right away.
- Promote good communication between all adults.
- Don't take frustrations out on the children.
- Have consistent rules in all households and between all children.
- Pay attention to all family members, but especially to the children. Consult a family counselor if you notice your children are experiencing the following distress signals:
  1. Unusual behavior at home or at school.
  2. Complaints of unexplainable fatigue.
  3. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, moodiness, and depression.
  4. Drastic weight fluctuations or irregular eating patterns.

As you go about taking care of others, it's very important to take care of your own health. Since more women are now the head of their household, paying attention to your own emotional and physical health will keep you on a steady path to better health.

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